



Traffic drives south on Highway 97 near the Cow Canyon Rest Area east of Shaniko on Oct. 20, 2018.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris, File

Speeding, crashes rising after speed limit change

By ANTONIO SIERRA
STAFF WRITER

Nearly two years after speed limits were increased on highways in central and Eastern Oregon, a state-funded analysis shows that serious wrecks on those roads have gone up at a faster rate than places where the limit was unchanged.

Using four years of data on crashes across state highways and automatic traffic recorders to measure speeds, the Oregon Department of Transportation and Portland State University found that fatal crashes went up by 36 percent on highways raised to 70 miles per hour and rose 67 percent on roads that were increased to 65 miles per hour.

The Oregon Legislature voted to raise the speed limit on Interstate 84 from Ontario to The Dalles, Interstate 82 in Umatilla County, and Highway 95 in southeastern Oregon from 65 miles per hour to 70. Sections of Highway 395, Highway 97, and Highway 20 jumped from 55 to 65. The bill received bipartisan support in both chambers of the Legislature, was signed into law by Gov. Kate Brown and ODOT made the changes in March 2016.

Portland State's study looked at the year following the speed limit increases, comparing it to data from the three years prior.

Chris Monsere, a PSU professor and the chair of the university's civil and environmental engineering department, said he previously collaborated with ODOT on two different reviews on the literature surrounding speed limit

increases.

Monsere and researchers Sirisha Kothuri and Jason Anderson found that speeding increased once the speed limits were relaxed.

In 70 mile per hour zones, vehicles traveling faster than 75 went up by 12 percent while drivers going past 85 went up by nearly 1 percent. In the 65 mile per hour zones, the most significant jump was in the percentage of vehicles going 65 or higher, which went up by 13.4 points.

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ODOT analysis

In comparison, none of the control group highway segments had an increase in speeders above 2 percent, and there was virtually no increase in the number of cars traveling 85 miles per hour or higher.

Crashes were up on raised speed limit highways across-the-board, and in most cases, those increases were larger than the control segments.

Crashes that caused serious injury or deaths rose by 36 percent on 70 mile per hour roads, but that number also went up by 37 percent on control segment highways.

The real contrast was on 65 mile per hour zones,

which saw a 67 percent increase compared with the 21-point increase seen on the control roads.

Despite the disparity in crashes between speed limit-increased roads and the control segments, traffic volume was only 10 percent higher in the speedier zones.

"These preliminary findings of the analysis are consistent with other related research and analysis that have found increased crash frequency and severity with increased speed limits," the study states.

Studying ODOT data and Oregon State Police press releases, a November *East Oregonian* analysis found that fatalities from traffic crashes rose 10 percent in the 26 months after the speed limit increase as opposed to a 3.5 percent decline in traffic deaths statewide.

Rep. Greg Barreto hadn't read Portland State's analysis and didn't want to comment, but he previously defended it after the *EO's* analysis, saying he wanted to see how many crashes were attributed to drunk or distracted driving.

Given the variety of factors that could lead to a crash, Monsere said it's difficult to determine cause of crash on a wide scale.

"You can think of a crash as having a random nature to it," he said.

But he also reiterated that there's a significant collection of research that shows that traffic collisions go up when speeds do.

Monsere said there's other limitations to his analysis.

Ideally, the study would be able to look at three

years of data after the speed limit increases went into effect instead of just one.

And since most of the well-traveled highways in Eastern Oregon already had their speed limits raised, he had to look at other parts of the state for control segments.

"They're not ideal matches," he said.

Monsere said he'd like to do a follow-up study not only with more crash data, but with more accurate speed readings as well.

While automatic traffic records are sparsely located on Eastern Oregon's two-lane highways, Monsere said the next analysis would use new software that uses numerous GPS data points to more accurately measure speed and differentiate between car and semitruck.

In the meantime, ODOT is already taking some safety measures after PSU's analysis.

Troy Costales, the ODOT Transportation and Employee Safety Division administrator, told the Oregon Transportation Commission at a Jan. 17 meeting that ODOT planned to continue to direct resources toward speed enforcement and could also install new signs and other infrastructure to prevent offroad and head-on crashes on two-lane roads.

In a Friday interview, Costales said the transportation commission is also starting a long-term discussion on establishing a process to change speed limits outside legislative acts.



Staff photo by Jade McDowell

Attendees at a regional school and childcare nutrition training sample different recipes for lunch at Umatilla High School in 2018.

Shutdown may have impact on local meal programs

By JAYATI RAMAKRISHNAN
STAFF WRITER

year, which is usually done in February.

President Donald Trump agreed on Friday to temporarily end the federal government shutdown, reopening the government through Feb. 15.

It's good news for the nearly 800,000 furloughed federal workers who were not working or receiving pay during the shutdown, but depending on what happens next, local people and programs could still be affected.

Area school districts rely on grants from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to fund food programs for low-income students.

Most said they were covered for the next few weeks, but if a shutdown lasts beyond next month, they'll be more concerned.

"We're really watching the February deadlines," Umatilla School District Superintendent Heidi Sipe said. "Currently, we're not seeing an impact on child nutrition; however, if the shutdown continues past February, we may have some struggles."

According to a press release from the Oregon Department of Education Child Nutrition Programs, the ODE will continue processing and paying for claims for federal assistance on food programs throughout March 2019. The press release stated that USDA, which contracts with vendors to ship food products to school, would continue operating normally through February, and that most products up through that point have already been purchased.

But the press release said if the shutdown lasts beyond February, it's unclear what will happen with food deliveries, as well as with ordering food for the following school

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is another program that local families have seen affected by the shutdown. The federal program gives low-income families some supplemental funds to purchase food.

Belit Burke, the program designer for DHS' self sufficiency program, said it's still too early to tell what the real impact of the shutdown will be. Oregon beneficiaries received their SNAP money for February a few weeks early to help with the lapse in funding. But they won't receive more benefits in February, even though the shutdown is temporarily over.

"Those benefits have to last," she said.

She said the amount that each family receives varies, but the average caseload receives \$209 per month.

"It's meant to be a supplement, but it ends up being many people's whole budget, so they live pretty lean," Burke said.

Other nutrition programs, like the WIC (Women, Infants and Children) program, are expected to be covered through February, as well.

The SNAP program is a different funding stream than the SNAP-Ed program, said Angie Treadwell, the OSU Extension Service coordinator of SNAP-Ed (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education). Treadwell said her program has already been funded for the entire fiscal year, so they will not be affected by the shutdown any time soon. That program provides ways for families to learn how to use their available resources to eat better, including family cooking classes and food tastings at local schools.

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